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ABSTRACT

To examine "bluffing"--ways in which conflicts in classrooms and evaluation procedures influence the styles of student writing and teachers' responses to different styles, a study analyzed the placement-test essays of 99 undergraduates entering Temple University (Pennsylvania) in the fall of 1982. Analysis of the texts was based on a taxonomy of given/new information developed by Ellen Prince (1981). Although specific styles of elaboration correlated significantly with the essays' holistic scores, close analysis revealed that the correlation could not be explained in terms of a contribution to the communication of text content. (A sample essay relying on information assumed unfamiliar, and a sample essay relying on information assumed familiar or inferable are appended.) (MM)

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Calling Writers' Bluffs: Sources of Readers' Judgements in University Placement Testing

In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae discusses some of the conflicts students must negotiate as they develop as writers. For Bartholomae, "since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned'" (135), students must learn to "bluff" their way into the university. To be perceived as competent members of an academic community, students must, in their writing, "act as if" they are saying something new which they are not, as if they have knowledge which they do not, as if they have an authority which they do not. In short, as writers, students must struggle to construct texts that represent, not only certain kinds of messages but also certain kinds of writers--with knowlege and authority which they in fact do not possess.

My work examines ways such bluffing gets done in university settings. In particular, it documents ways in which conflicts in classrooms and evaluation procedures influence the styles of writing students produce and ways teachers respond to different styles. In the time I have this afternoon, I will outline the theoretical assumptions about language and social life on which my work is based, discuss several of my findings thus far, and suggest some direction for further study.

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My work proceeds from the premise that writing is best viewed as a multifunctional social construction. It is multifunctional in the sense of Halliday (1975), who proposes a model of language use in which all three language functions--referential, interpersonal, and textual-- co-occur within the same linguistic forms. In other words, the use of one form over another form to represent a message simultaneously represents an identity for the writer in relation to the reader and represents conventions and presuppositions assumed to hold in that discourse. The use of "I prefer life in the city" vs "My preference is for life in the city" contrasts in terms of topic-comment relations, i.e. what is presumed to be the topic under discussion, but it also contrasts in the writer-reader relations presumed as well. The former is more direct, more assertive, suggesting more equal, if not also intimate, relations between the two participants.

The major consequence of this is that the interpretation of linguistic forms is intrinsically ambiguous. By ambiguous, I am not here concerned so much with problems of reference or of what language philosophers call "truth-value." Rather, the issue concerns the question of how linguistic forms are to be interpreted as <u>functioning</u> within a given context. The importance of the form of a particular utterance <u>may</u> lie in the way it represents the message, the writer, or the kind of conventions and values presumed. But, as Hymes (1962/1968), has pointed out, its <u>actual</u> significance "cannot be determined from linguistic factors alone" (p. 112). In short, if a text represents a set of instructions from writer to readers on how to construct meaning, those instructions always concern all aspects of that meaning--and they are always incomplete.

It is in this sense that I understand writing to be a social construction. In producing and interpreting a discourse, spoken or written, participants must appeal to their beliefs and assumptions about the situation: about what information can be presumed to be familiar, about participants' identities, about discourse conventions. But, as Michael Silverstein, Richard Ohmann, Mary Pratt, Linda Brodkey and others have pointed out, situations are themselves multiple. In producing and interpreting texts writers and readers do not assume a single role or a single purpose. The memo I receive about problems in my program budget is written by the associate dean to a prgogram director for the purpose of informing him about a problem, and it's also written by a friend to warn me about a move to cut our budget. It would be absurd to say that a text realizes one role or another, one purpose or another. Indeed, it is precisely the interaction of those multiple and conflicting factors that makes the form of the text take the shape that it ultimately does.

Certainly writing in school settings occurs within more than a single context. Take, for instance, the topic reprinted at the top of page 1 on your handout, one of our placement-test topics. It specifies a full rhetorical context--one with primarily an informative purpose, with participant relations those of the concerned student to parents and citizens, and with conventions those of the newspaper essay. But, the writing also occurs within a social context, one in which the participant relations are those of pupil to teacher-examiner, the conventions those of the impromptu essay, and the purpose to avoid taking a non-credit, full-tuition, writing course.

One way of pursuing what it means to "bluff" then, is to examine how conflicts and contradictions in situations such as the one I just described influence writing and reading of student texts. My study analyzed the placement-test essays of 99 undergraduates entering Temple University in the fall of 1982. Analysis of the texts was based on a taxonomy of given/new information developed by Ellen Prince (1981). Focusing on the elaboration of information in noun phrases, I found that specific styles of elaboration correlate significantly and substantively with the holistic scores given to the essays by readers. However, close analysis of several of these styles argues strongly that the significance of the correlation cannot adequately be explained in terms of their contribution to the communication of text content. In fact, each style represents a deviation away from what we should expect if the main point of the encounter had been the cooperative exchange of information in the sense discussed by Grice (1975). On the one hand, the elaborations give little or no help to readers in identifying what is being referred to--i.e., the elaboration is unnecessarily redundant. On the other hand, the elaboration is quite helpful in constructing a social identity for the writer in the situation--i.e., the elaboration tells us what kind of pupil this is.

The essay on page 1 of your handout illustrates one style of elaboration that correlated significantly with essay score. The identity of writers represented by such a style is well-known in the world of school assignments. It is that of the writer who knows "How to Say Nothing in Five Hundred Words" (Roberts, 1958), who is not simply resolving a conflict in communicating information but who represents the "point" of this communication as taking a

test. In each of the underlined phrases, the form of the elaboration "acts as if" something is being communicated when in fact nothing is. The writing appears to be cooperative, using linguistic forms which mimic an exchange of information but which obscure any exchange: the use of these forms actually lessens the degree to which any content can be understood. Referentially, these noun phrases are almost contentless, maintaining only the appearance of keeping the discourse coherent. Paradoxically, this over-representation of form functions to under-represent content.

Let me elaborate a little at this point. The underlined noun phrases are, in the taxonomy I used, "brand new." The indefinite article marks them as presupposing that readers are totally unfamiliar with the information represented. Had the purpose of writing been primarily to inform, the prepositional and verbal phrases elaborating that information should function to link it to something more familiar to readers, in the same way that it is more co-operative for me to say "A guy I know" than it is for me to say "A guy." The former phrase links information unfamiliar to hearers "a guy" to information more familiar to them "I." But the elaboration in the noun phrases in this paper adds little of substance. In some cases, the information is linked to something itself marked as equally unfamiliar to the reader, such as in par. 3, when the writer links "a book" to "a school" or in par. 1 when the writer links "a discussion" to "group" and "some sort" to "program." Even the kind of information portrayed as brand-new differes in important ways from what we should expect. In this example, of the 11 underlined noun phrases, 7 represent non-specific, if not generic ideas. When this writer refers to "a group discussion," "a book report following questions written up by the

school," or "a book from a school," she seems to be assuming that little of substance is shared with readers for any of this information. Thus, the scores given to this style legitimize not only the rhetorical abilities of the writers but also the social identity--that of the test-taker--established in this situation.

Essay two illustrates a second style of elaboration that correlates significantly with essay score. In contrast to the first, this style relies heavily on substantive elaboration of information. Prince has found this kind of elaboration used in situations where readers' knowledge is presumed to vary widely. In such situations, the phrases attached to the head noun function to identify information which may be unfamiliar to some of the readers. For, instance, in the utterance "Scholars, such as Ernst Cassirer and Kenneth Burke," written for a group of linguists, the information in the appositive phrase enables those less familiar to identify at least the sort of scholars being referred to.

In this situation, the salient function of this style lies not in the way it characterizes the message but in the way it characterizes the sender, as a student who knows "her stuff" and who identifies as shared the kind of literate knowledge and values of the community into which she was seeking entrance. This style also includes elaborative phrases that "act as if" more information is needed to identify the information (referent) than is required in fact, given the readers of this essay. Neither the identification of the authors of Oedipus the King and of Othello nor the identification of Lord Acton as the author of the final quotation is necessary to identify the information. Readers who could not already identify Oedipus or the source of

the quotation are not likely to be able to identify the named authors. Few readers, on the other hand, do not know who wrote Othello. Yet, in this piece of writing, information was consistently cast in a form which implicated that readers required additional information to identify what was being referred to, but which in fact was redundant. It did represent the writer, however, as a pupil who could identify--not to mention spell--the authors of great literary works, the dates of important historical events, and the authors of famous quotations. In contrast to the style exemplified in the previous essay, this over-representation of form also over-represents substance (factual, definite information), an over-representation which readers seem to have evaluated as ratifying writers' credibility.

My work so far has examined bluffs which are usually evaluated as successful responses to conflicts in this situation. But, a bluff is, by definition, risky. It can always be called. Writers who adopt the style illustrated in Essay 1 can have their texts evaluated as vacuous--which they are. Those who adopt the style illustrated in Essay 2 can have their texts evaluated as self-indulgent name-droppings--which they are. Under what circumstances are different kinds of bluffs called? What kinds of teachers call what kinds of bluffs? I am also interested in examining the stability of different styles. Do different situations elicit different styles or do the same styles tend to appear in all situations? Do individual writers adopt different styles in different situations or do they consistently rely on a single style?

One way to pursue these questions would be to vary entity types systematically in texts. One set might use these types of information in ways

that conform precisely to Gricean principles of co-operation. Others might use these entities in ways that create certain social identities. The analysis here predicts that readers should evaluate texts in which certain social identities are constructed significantly differently from those in which linguistic form follows precisely from Gricean criteria. Moreover, the kinds of situations in which the essays are read need to vary as well. The analysis here predicts that in situations which function predominantly as a means of gatekeeping patterns of elaboration that deviate from Gricean criteria should be much more salient than those which do not.

Finally, I want to examine sources of these styles in writers' and readers' backgrounds. If these styles are responses to possible ways of constructing the situation, what elements in writers' background prompts particular constructions? What kinds of schooling, for instance, result in different styles? For teachers as readers, what elements in their expereience influence them to respond the way they do to different styles?

Example One

Essay Relying on Information Assumed Unfamiliar
(Total Essay Score of 8 out of 12)

Topic: Suppose that your school board has proposed to ban certain books from the high school library on the grounds that they contain foul language or explicit sex. Write an essay for your local newspaper that explains to the school board your position as a student on this issue. Be sure to include good reasons for your stand.

Banning books due to unethical content has become a rising issue in high school libraries (Specific). The high schools don't want anything to do with books that contain foul language and/or explicit sex (Nonspecific). Instead of banning such books, the schools could use these books as a way of teaching the students what is actually contained in the books and how to deal with it (Specific). The students would read the books anyway, whether receiving them from school or somewhere else. Instead of having the students get the book from somewhere else and just reading the "trashy" parts, the schools could form some sort of program (Nonspecific). One idea could be a group discussion (Nonspecific). A few students could read the book & then discuss it with a teacher, a librarian, etc. Another program would be that if a student wanted to check the book out of a library he would have to get his parent's permission. The student would also have to write a book report following questions written up by the school (Nonspecific).

Sex, violence, and language have all become a big part in today's society (Specific). Sex, especially has become more outspoken, it is displayed on T.V., in magazines, in the movies, and in books. Banning these books aren't going to shelter the students over the issues. In my opionion it's just an easy way out for the high schools (Specific), one less problem to deal with.

I can see the school's point on one hand, that by keeping these books the parents of students might get upset. Even some of the parents are ignorant. They won't let their child read a book from a school (Nonspecific), but they will let them go to the movies where sex is displayed on the screen in front of the child's eyes.

The whole issue of banning books should be brought up before the school board, but the issue should be to keep the books; devise programs to teach the students what is in them, what the author was saying, etc. The issue should be talked over with the parents. Maybe the parents could read the books with their children & discuss what sex is about & what is ethical & what isn't.

Books should not be banned from high school libraries. If a student wants to read a book that isn't up to "standards," (Nonspecific) then there should be some instructionilized guidance to go along with it (Nonspecific), otherwise, the student will get the book from somewhere else just to be rebelious & find out what it is that's so bad in the books.

Example Two

Essay Relying on Information Assumed Familiar or Inferrable
(Total Score of 12)

The school board of Emmaus High School has been considering a ban on certain books in its high school library . As a student of this school and a citizen of the free and democratic United States I must vehemently protest this action. If the school board votes to ban certain books because of lewd language or explicit sex what is to stop them or other institutions from banning books for political, social or religious reasons? Limited censorship can be a dangerous thing because it is a power that is very easily abused.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 one of the first things the new regime did was [to] ban books "offensive" to the government. Many of these books were not offensive because they contained explicit sex or foul language but because they conveyed ideas and principles that conflicted with those of the government. In many cases explicit sex and foul language were used as excuses for this censorship. In Nazi Germany book burning was common. Today Russia and other Communist-block countries actively censor and burn books. Giving anyone the power to censor books is unwise, there is always the danger of getting carried away and grasping too much power, as the activities of Russia and other such nations plainly show.

The censorship of books and repression of intellectual activity for whatever reasons are the first step toward a totalitarian regime. If school boards are given the right to censor books perhaps the government will one day wish to ban books in schools and universities supported by federal funds. Once the wheel starts rolling it will be difficult to stop. The government might then wish to censor other aspects of citizens' lives.

Many works of fine literature contain foul language and explicit sex. Some of these works would be incomplete without them. Would one censor Sophocles's "Oedipus the King" because it contains references to incest and also violence? Should Shakespeare be banned because his "Othello" portrays adultery? Some people might say yes. What is not offensive to one may be shocking to others.

Most high school students have been exposed to foul language and explicit sex from a very early age. The electronic media is greatly responsible for this. I believe that a few explicit paragraphs in a book will do little to enlightend an already worldly child to the evil ways of the world. If people are afraid [that] children will be shocked or offended by certain books then they can put little markers on them saying that these materials might be offensive to some people. These little markers might even work to some advantage. A child who rarely reads might be enticed to read some fine literature.

I believe that the school board should not be given the power to exercise censorship. Censorship in any form is an evil thing that can have catastrophic consequences. Lord Acton put it best when he stated, "All power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely." We must not allow this to happen.